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ABSTRACT

Bullying is a serious problem that can dramatically affect the ability of students to progress academically and socially. Bullying is comprised of direct behaviors such as teasing, taunting, threatening, hitting, and stealing that are initiated by one or more students against a victim. Bullying may also be more indirect by causing a student to be socially isolated through intentional exclusion. Studies indicate that bullies often come from homes where physical punishment is used, where the children are taught to strike back physically as a way to handle problems, and where parental involvement and warmth are frequently lacking. Students who are victims of bullying are typically anxious, insecure, cautious, and suffer from low self-esteem, rarely defending themselves or retaliating when confronted by students who bully them. A strong correlation appears to exist between bullying other students during the school years and experiencing legal or criminal troubles as adults, while being bullied leads to depression and low self-esteem. Parents are often unaware of the bullying problem and talk about it with their children only to a limited extent, and school personnel may view bullying as a harmless right of passage that is best ignored unless verbal and psychological intimidation crosses the line into physical assault or theft. Effective interventions at the school, class, and individual levels may include the following components: (1) an initial questionnaire distributed to students and adults; (2) a parental awareness campaign conducted during parent-teacher conference days, through parent newsletters, and at PTA meetings; and (3) teachers working with students at the class level to develop class rules against bullying. Other components of effective anti-bullying programs include individualized interventions with the bullies and victims, the implementation of cooperative learning activities to reduce social isolation, and increasing adult supervision at key times. (LPP)

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Bullying in Schools

Ron Banks

Bullying in schools is a worldwide problem that can have negative consequences for the general school climate and for the right of students to learn in a safe environment without fear. Bullying can also have negative lifelong consequences—both for students who bully and for their victims. Although much of the formal research on bullying has taken place in the Scandinavian countries, Great Britain, and Japan, the problems associated with bullying have been noted and discussed wherever formal schooling environments exist.

Bullying is comprised of direct behaviors such as teasing, taunting, threatening, hitting, and stealing that are initiated by one or more students against a victim. In addition to direct attacks, bullying may also be more indirect by causing a student to be socially isolated through intentional exclusion. While boys typically engage in direct bullying methods, girls who bully are more apt to utilize these more subtle indirect strategies, such as spreading rumors and enforcing social isolation (Ahmad & Smith, 1994; Smith & Sharp, 1994). Whether the bullying is direct or indirect, the key component of bullying is that the physical or psychological intimidation occurs repeatedly over time to create an ongoing pattern of harassment and abuse (Batsche & Knoff, 1994; Olweus, 1993).

Extent of the Problem

Various reports and studies have established that approximately 15% of students are either bullied regularly or are initiators of bullying behavior (Olweus, 1993). Direct bullying seems to increase through the elementary years, peak in the middle school/junior high school years, and decline during the high school years. However, while direct physical assault seems to decrease with age, verbal abuse appears to remain constant. School size, racial composition, and school setting (rural, suburban, or urban) do not seem to be distinguishing factors in predicting the occurrence of bullying. Finally, boys engage in bullying behavior and are victims of bullies more frequently than girls (Batsche & Knoff, 1994; Nolin, Davies, & Chandler, 1995; Olweus, 1993; Whitney & Smith, 1993).

Characteristics of Bullies and Victims

Students who engage in bullying behaviors seem to have a need to feel powerful and in control. They appear to derive satisfaction from inflicting injury and suffering on others, seem to have little empathy for their victims, and often defend their actions by saying that their victims provoked them in some way. Studies indicate that bullies often come from homes where physical punishment is used, where the children are taught to strike back physically as a way to handle problems, and where parental involvement and warmth are frequently lacking. Students who regularly display bullying behaviors are generally defiant or oppositional toward adults, antisocial, and apt to break school rules. In contrast to prevailing myths, bullies appear to have little anxiety and to possess strong self-esteem. There is little evidence to support the contention that they victimize others because they feel bad about themselves (Batsche & Knoff, 1994; Olweus, 1993).

Students who are victims of bullying are typically anxious, insecure, cautious, and suffer from low self-esteem, rarely defending themselves or retaliating when confronted by students who bully them. They may lack social skills and friends, and they are often socially isolated. Victims tend to be close to their parents and may have parents who can be described as overprotective. The major defining physical characteristic of victims is that they tend to be physically weaker than their peers—other physical characteristics such as weight, dress, or wearing eyeglasses do not appear to be significant factors that can be correlated with victimization (Batsche & Knoff, 1994; Olweus, 1993).

Consequences of Bullying

As established by studies in Scandinavian countries, a strong correlation appears to exist between bullying other students during the school years and experiencing legal or criminal troubles as adults. In one study, 60% of those characterized as bullies in grades 6-9 had at least one criminal conviction by age 24 (Olweus, 1993). Chronic bullies seem to maintain their behaviors into adulthood, negatively influencing their ability to develop and maintain positive relationships (Oliver, Hoover, & Hazler, 1994).

Victims often fear school and consider school to be an unsafe and unhappy place. As many as 7% of America's eighth-graders stay home at least once a month because of bullies. The act of being bullied tends to increase some students' isolation because their peers do not want to lose status by associating with them or because they do not want to increase the risks of being bullied themselves. Being bullied leads to depression and low self-esteem, problems that can carry into adulthood (Olweus, 1993; Batsche & Knoff, 1994).

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Perceptions of Bullying

Oliver, Hoover, and Hazler (1994) surveyed students in the Midwest and found that a clear majority felt that victims were at least partially responsible for bringing the bullying on themselves. Students surveyed tended to agree that bullying toughened a weak person, and some felt that bullying "taught" victims appropriate behavior. Charach, Pepler, and Ziegler (1995) found that students considered victims to be "weak," "nerds," and "afraid to fight back." However, 43% of the students in this study said that they try to help the victim, 33% said that they should help but do not, and only 24% said that bullying was none of their business.

Parents are often unaware of the bullying problem and talk about it with their children only to a limited extent (Olweus, 1993). Student surveys reveal that a low percentage of students seem to believe that adults will help. Students feel that adult intervention is infrequent and ineffective, and that telling adults will only bring more harassment from bullies. Students report that teachers seldom or never talk to their classes about bullying (Charach, Pepler, & Ziegler, 1995). School personnel may view bullying as a harmless right of passage that is best ignored unless verbal and psychological intimidation crosses the line into physical assault or theft.

Intervention Programs

Bullying is a problem that occurs in the social environment as a whole. The bullies' aggression occurs in social contexts in which teachers and parents are generally unaware of the extent of the problem and other children are either reluctant to get involved or simply do not know how to help (Charach, Pepler, & Ziegler, 1995). Given this situation, effective interventions must involve the entire school community rather than focus on the perpetrators and victims alone. Smith and Sharp (1994) emphasize the need to develop whole-school bullying policies, implement curricular measures, improve the schoolground environment, and empower students through conflict resolution, peer counseling, and assertiveness training. Olweus (1993) details an approach that involves interventions at the school, class, and individual levels. It includes the following components:

- An initial questionnaire can be distributed to students and adults. The questionnaire helps both adults and students become aware of the extent of the problem, helps to justify intervention efforts, and serves as a benchmark to measure the impact of improvements in school climate once other intervention components are in place.
- A parental awareness campaign can be conducted during parent-teacher conference days, through parent newsletters, and at PTA meetings. The goal is to increase parental awareness of the problem, point out the importance of parental involvement for program success, and encourage parental support of program goals. Questionnaire results are publicized.
- Teachers can work with students at the class level to develop class rules against bullying. Many programs engage students in a series of formal role-playing exercises and related assignments that can teach those students directly involved in bullying alternative methods of interaction. These programs can also show other students how they can assist victims and how everyone can work together to create a school climate where bullying is not tolerated (Sjostrom & Stein, 1996).
- Other components of anti-bullying programs include individualized interventions with the bullies and victims, the implementation of cooperative learning activities to reduce social isolation, and increasing adult supervision at key times (e.g., recess or lunch). Schools that have implemented Olweus's program have reported a 50% reduction in bullying.

Conclusion

Bullying is a serious problem that can dramatically affect the ability of students to progress academically and socially. A comprehensive intervention plan that involves all students, parents, and school staff is required to ensure that all students can learn in a safe and fear-free environment.

A Resource List on this topic is also available.

For More Information

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References identified with an ED (ERIC document), EJ (ERIC journal), or PS number are cited in the ERIC database. Most documents are available in ERIC microfiche collections at more than 900 locations worldwide, and can be ordered through EDRS: (800) 443-ERIC. Journal articles are available from the original journal, interlibrary loan services, or article reproduction clearinghouses such as UnCover (800-787-7979), UMI (800-732-0616), or ISI (800-523-1850).

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